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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment of college students by college faculty is not an uncommon occurrence and may influence women's career decisions to enter male-dominated professions. Attitudes about sexual harassment of college students by professors were examined among 84 male and 84 female college students. Each student was shown one of six scenarios based on three professor-student interactions that varied in harassment severity and gender of harasser and victim. Subjects were then asked to judge the appropriateness of the professor's behavior on a five-point scale from appropriate to extremely inappropriate. The students were also asked whether the professor's behavior should be reported. A factorial analysis of variance was conducted to assess the effects of gender of student, gender of victim, and level of harassment severity on perceived appropriateness. A main effect was found for level of harassment severity and for gender of student. Students' recommendations to report the professor's behavior were significantly related to manipulated severity and to rated severity, but not to gender of the rater or the victim. More serious acts of harassment were rated as more inappropriate and more deserving of being reported. Women rated behaviors as more inappropriate than did men. (Author/NB)

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Severity and Gender Effects on Ratings of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

Attitudes about sexual harassment of college students by professors were examined among 168 college students (84 males and 84 females). Each student was shown one of six scenarios based on three professor-student interactions that varied in harassment severity and gender of harasser and victim and was asked to judge the appropriateness of the professor's behavior on a five-point scale from appropriate to extremely inappropriate. The students were also asked whether the professor's behavior should be reported. A factorial ANOVA was conducted to assess the effects of gender of student, gender of victim, and level of harassment severity on perceived appropriateness. A main effect was found for level of harassment severity, $F(2,156)=56.42$, $p=.001$, and for gender of student, $F(1,156)=5.89$, $p<.05$. Students' recommendations to report the professor's behavior were significantly related to manipulated severity, $\chi^2(3, N=166)=84.84$, $p<.0001$, and rated severity, $\chi^2(2, N=166)=57.14$, $p<.0001$, but not to gender of the rater or victim. More serious acts of harassment were rated as more inappropriate and more deserving of being reported. Women rated behaviors as more inappropriate than men did.

Severity and Gender Effects on Ratings of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment of college students by college faculty is not an uncommon occurrence and may influence women's career decisions to enter male-dominated professions (e.g., Benson & Thomson, 1982; Cammaert, 1985). Benson and Thomson (1982) found that 30% of 269 women seniors reported at least one incident of sexual harassment by a male instructor during their college career. Cammaert (1985) found that 20% of 264 undergraduate women reported experiencing sexually inappropriate behavior exhibited by someone in authority (e.g., professor, teaching assistant), while 43% of 86 graduate women reported the same.

Definitions of sexual harassment vary across studies. Adams, Kottke, and Padgitt (1983) surveyed male and female graduate and undergraduate students and found that, though students tended to agree that more extreme behaviors (physical advances, propositions, etc.) constitute sexual harassment, women were more likely to include more ambiguous behaviors (undue attention, sexist comments, etc.) as well. Padgitt and Padgitt (1986) also found gender differences in the perception of what constitutes sexual harassment. Women clearly indicated that harassing behavior was also offensive, but men sometimes rated the same behaviors as less than offensive.

Reilly, Carpenter, Dull, and Bartlett (1982) analyzed the responses of undergraduate students and faculty members to vignettes of an interaction between a male instructor and a female student. The students were asked to judge to what extent each vignette reflected sexual harassment. In

general, they found no major disagreement in the way the groups (male and female students, faculty) defined sexual harassment, especially for vignettes toward the extremes of the scale, i.e., those that clearly did or did not involve harassment. The greatest factors influencing the severity of harassment ratings were acts or statements on the part of the instructor suggesting coercion; the inclusion of provocative behavior by the victim reduced harassment ratings.

Gutek, Morasch, and Cohen (1983) surveyed male and female undergraduate students to determine how people interpret vignettes depicting ambiguous, but potentially sexual interactions between men and women in a work setting. They manipulated the sex of the initiator of the behavior, the status of the initiator relative to the target (i.e., employer, employee, or co-worker), and the type of behavior (i.e., pat on the fanny while commenting about anatomy or commenting about work or comment about the body without touching). They found that incidents initiated by a higher status person, that involved touching, or that were initiated by men were rated more negatively and that women interpreted the vignettes more negatively than did men, especially for events involving touching. The difference in status in an employer/employee relationship is similar to that in an instructor/student relationship.

It is clear that campus sexual harassment occurs; do students feel it should be reported? Sullivan, Redner, and Bogat (1985) found that students believe women who experience mild harassment are less likely to report the incident than women who experience severe harassment. Adams et al. (1983) found that most respondents believe that more extreme incidents of

sexual harassment (e.g., physical advances, propositions) should be reported; however, 8% of the women and 23% of the men would not report the more extreme acts. They also found that none of the respondents who had experienced these behaviors had reported the incident to a university official. This result parallels similar conclusions cited in their literature review and indicates that while most students believe that these acts should be reported, in actuality complaints are rarely filed.

This study examines the effects of gender of victim, gender of student rater, and severity of sexual harassment on students' rating of appropriateness in six hypothetical professor-student interactions. The relationships between these independent variables, as well as the dependent variable, and students' opinion that the incident should be reported to the professor's supervisor are also investigated. The study is unique in that the scenarios included female professor-male student harassment as well as the traditional harassment of women by men. It was hypothesized that women perceive the descriptions of harassment as being more inappropriate than men and more often recommend reporting the incident (Adams et al.,1983; Gutek et al.,1983) and that the more severe the level of harassment, the more likely the student will recommend that the incident be reported (Adams et al. 1983).
In addition, male harassers should be viewed more negatively than female harassers (Gutek et al., 1983).

Method

Subjects

Eighty-four students of each gender from a small western college

participated in this study. Students' ages ranged from 19 to 51, with two not providing this information. The average age of the men was 26.47 (SD=6.76), and the average age of the women was 27.86 (SD=7.74). The sample was 12% lower-division, 68% upper-division, and 19% graduate students; 1% did not provide class level data.

Materials

Data were collected on a survey that included a request for demographic data, a brief scenario describing a professor-student interaction, a five-point rating scale on the appropriateness of the professor's behavior (from appropriate to extremely inappropriate), and a question on whether the professor's behavior should be reported to a supervisor.

Six scenarios were adapted from Sullivan et al. (1985) and depicted professor-student interactions demonstrating three levels of sexual harassment: mild, moderate, and severe, with either a male professor-female student or a female professor-male student interaction. All scenarios begin with a student going to the professor's office for assistance with a major paper. In the severe scenario the professor begins to rub the student's neck and implies that the student's cooperation is necessary to pass the course. In the moderate scenario, the professor compliments the student on the fit of his/her jeans and then rubs the student's neck. In the mild scenario the professor looks at the student's body rather than the face while having a conversation. Each of the interactions terminates when the phone rings and the student leaves the office. The scenarios at each level were identical in content except for

gender.

Procedure

Each of seven students in an upper-division research methods course administered the instrument to 12 males and 12 females selected on campus, insuring that an equal number of males and females were in each of the six conditions. Each researcher attempted to randomly select subjects and did not test acquaintances or classmates. Researchers approached potential students with the following standardized introduction:

> Hi! My name is _____. I'm a student in a research methods class. We're conducting a survey to find out how students perceive and respond to sexual harassment by professors toward students. It will take about five minutes of your time; would you be willing to participate?

Results

A 2x2x3 factorial analysis of variance was conducted with gender of victim, gender of student, and scenario's harassment level as independent variables and student's appropriateness rating as the dependent variable. A main effect was found for scenario's harassment level, $F(2,156)=56..42$, $p=.001$. The averages for the mild, moderate, and severe levels were $M=3.12$ ($SD=1.08$), $M=4.29$ ($SD=0.85$), and $M=4.73$ ($SD=0.56$), respectively. There was also a main effect for gender of student, $F(1,156)=5.89$, $p<.05$. The average male student's rating was 3.89 ($SD=1.14$), and the average female student's rating was 4.20 ($SD=0.10$). No main effect was found for gender of victim, nor were there any significant interactions. To explore

the significant main effect for severity of harassment, Tukey's Honestly Significant Test was conducted for pair-wise comparisons. Each of the three pair-wise comparisons was significant at .001 level.

Due to the low number of responses at the appropriate and mildly inappropriate levels, these responses were combined for chi-square analyses involving the relationship of appropriateness ratings and the recommendation to report the act. The relationship was significant, $\chi^2(3, N=166)=84.84$, $p<.0001$. None of the students who rated the behavior as appropriate or mildly inappropriate indicated that the incident should be reported; 17% of those who rated the incident as moderately inappropriate, 64% of those who rated the incident as very inappropriate, and 93% of those who rated the incident as severely inappropriate responded that the incident should be reported. A significant relationship was also found between manipulated level of harassment and the recommendation to report the incident, $\chi^2(2, N=166)=57.14$, $p.<.0001$. The percentage recommending reporting the incident was 25% for the mild, 70% for the moderate, and 93% for the severe scenario.

Chi-square tests conducted to examine the relationships of the recommendation to report the incident and gender of student and gender of victim were not significant.

Discussion

As was expected, women rated the harassment as more inappropriate than men did (replicating findings by Gutek et al., 1983, and Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986). Male administrators must be sensitive to this difference and recognize that their perception of the seriousness of sexually

harassing acts may be less severe than the perception of women victims and their advocates. Research strategies that explore differences in criteria for ratings of inappropriate behavior may lead to a reevaluation by each gender, by uncovering possible misinterpretations of the other's behaviors. A common understanding of the limits of sexuality in the college setting, especially between faculty and students, would benefit everyone. Explicit statements of campus standards and procedures for handling sexual harassment accusations may reduce problems associated with this gender difference.

Results also indicated that more severe harassment scenarios that involved touching or coercion were rated as more inappropriate (confirming results of Sullivan et al., 1985, and Adams et al., 1983). Respondents also more often suggested reporting the more serious incidents, as was found by the latter two research teams. As Adams and her colleagues reported, some people do not recommend reporting even a "severely inappropriate act," but this percentage was only 7% in this study and was not related to gender. Follow-up interviews with these students would have been particularly interesting, since they may uncover what recourse they expect victims to pursue.

No main effects nor interactions were found for the gender of the scenario's dyad. Students were not sex-biased in their assignment of inappropriateness ratings (contrary to Gutek et al.,1983) and recommendations to report the behavior. Female professors who harass male students were rated the same as male professors who harass female students. Campus procedures for handling sexual harassment complaints

must encourage and handle complaints from both genders. Homosexual harassment has not been examined and does occur on college campuses (Adams et al., 1983), so further research is necessary to fully explore the effect of gender of the harasser and victim on perceived appropriateness and need to report such acts.

Although the genders did differ on their ratings on the level of inappropriateness, they were not significantly different in their attitudes toward reporting the incident, contrary to what one would expect from the Padgitt and Padgitt (1986) and Sullivan et al. (1985) results. Research suggests that the gender difference is strongest for non-extreme harassment (Adams et al., 1983; Reilly et al., 1982). The present scenarios' mean ratings ranged from 3.12 (where a 3 is "moderately inappropriate") to 4.73 (where 5 is "extremely inappropriate"), perhaps having sufficient power to detect differences on the rating scale, but not on the dichotomous decision to report the incident. Original instructions to the students suggested that all would be reading a scene involving sexual harassment, which may have inflated ratings given to the "mild" scenario. If we were to replicate this study, we would use a less suggestive introduction.

Another important issue not examined in the present study is the discrepancy between attitude and behavior. Since sexual harassment similar to that described in the scenarios clearly does occur on campuses (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Cammaert, 1985), and such acts frequently are not reported (Sullivan et al., 1985), we must attempt to understand why the victims do not file complaints. One possible explanation suggested by

the present results is that women victims are aware that males (presumably including male administrators) consider sexual harassment as a less serious offense than women, so may conclude that their accusations will not be treated seriously. If this is true, male administrators should make extra efforts to publicly condemn sexual harassment, and rapidly and effectively follow up on all complaints. These results indicate that people feel that sexual harassment, especially in more serious forms, should be reported. An atmosphere that supports such responses and a well-publicized, effective system for handling complaints must be fostered.

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